THE TREATMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

GEORGE WILLIAM DOUGLAS
D. D., S. T. D.

THE TREATMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

A SERMON

Delivered in St. Mary's Church
Tuxedo Park, N. Y.
on Sunday, September 23, 1917

BY THE
REV. GEORGE WILLIAM DOUGLAS
D.D., S.T.D.

Printed by request of the President of the National Park Bank
for distribution among his clerks and employees.

NEW YORK
1917

FOREWORD

THIS sermon was originally written in the form of an article which is to be published in *The Chronicle,* as a sequel to my article in that magazine some months ago, entitled "The Die Is Cast". A little later when the Rev. J. Howard Melish, temporarily disabled by a fall, asked me to preach in his pulpit, I turned what I had just written into the form of a sermon and delivered it at Holy Trinity Church, Brooklyn. The following Sunday I preached it again at St. Mary's, Tuxedo Park; and when my friend, Mr. Richard Delafield, after the service, asked me to let him print my sermon so that he might distribute it immediately among the four hundred employees of the National Park Bank, I could not but be grateful that my sermon was considered serviceable for such a purpose.

G. W. D.

Tuxedo Park, N. Y.
September 23rd, 1917.

THE TREATMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

BY REV. GEORGE WILLIAM DOUGLAS
D. D., S. T. D.

Their weak conscience.—*1 Cor. viii, 12.*

Speaking lies in hypocracy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron.—*1 Timothy I, 5.* IV, 2

I exercise myself to have always a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men.—*Acts xxiv, 16.*

THESE assembled texts are characteristic of the whole New Testament in their reference to the human conscience as a moral force: in their description of it as of varying force in different men, and in the same man at different times, even to the point of becoming seared and inoperative; or again, of being hypocritically used as a blind to deceive others, though one be not self-deceived. No wonder, then, that the Apostle Paul describes himself as exercising his conscience as the athlete practices his muscles in order to be fit—prepared for the ordeal of human life in this dangerous and deceptive world.

In St. Paul's day, when Christians were just beginning their course in a world that as yet was almost wholly pagan, the dangers to even a practised conscience were evident. The path of the soul was plainly like what Bunyan describes when Pil-

grim's progress was beset by pitfalls, and the light was dim, and the devil ready to swoop down if Christian stumbled. And, men and brethren, who shall say that you and I are not now living in a world that must be similarly described? Who of us that surveys with sincerity the life he has to lead, and feels in his inmost soul the difficulties, and the subtle searching problems that beset him, can do otherwise than Paul did, and try to *exercise* himself to have a conscience void of offence toward God and toward men?

A little while ago I was requested to give for publication "my frank thought regarding the treatment of Conscientious Objectors". As those who have tried to think it out know well by this time, if one is to be true to the all-round ethics of Jesus Christ the question thus propounded must be answered somewhat fully, if at all. So after I had written my letter to the newspaper, it occurred to me that if I should make my article over into a sermon it might be of service when, at our Rector's request, I took his place today.

I do not think that much can be now accomplished by argument with Conscientious Objectors to military service: we must

> "Act, act in the living present
> "Heart within, and God o'erhead."

Bishop Griswold, Suffragan of Chicago, recently remarked that "War is not Hell: it is Purgatory". All life is purgatorial, and the Conscientious Objector shall not escape the ordeal.

(1) His ordeal will be twofold: religious and political; though ultimately sincere religion permeates the whole life, and our Heavenly Father, to Whom, as our Collect this morning declared, "all hearts are open, and from Whom no secrets are hid", shall try every man's work of what sort it is. Thus in his present objections to war-service the sincerely conscientious person must be ready for martyrdom—prepared to bear manful testimony to what he believes to be his duty; and the best treatment that we who differ from him can give is, to leave him in God's hands as to his religion. Only by the ordeal of martyrdom shall it be revealed who were slackers, and who faithful unto death.

> The mills of God grind slowly,
> But they grind exceeding small.
> Though with patience He stands waiting,
> With exactness grinds He all.

Yet from the religious, even as from the political standpoint, let not the Conscientious Objector, in his plea for non-resistance and his objection to this war, presume that he himself is in a passive attitude. For he too is fighting, and with his chosen weapons he actually is killing men—thousands of them. Very likely he will soon be helping to kill his own kith and kin. For he is playing Germany's game, staying the hands of the Allies, postponing the decision, darkening counsel. He is hand in hand with the German agents all over the world who are trying to accomplish by intrigue within the nations what German arms cannot accomplish

on the battlefields. Ever since Germany with rape and rapine burst into Belgium in defiance of all human obligations and moral law, and since the morning of the Lusitania, Germany has forced upon all mankind an issue, not of guns merely, but of morals and religion. Now morals and religion are the chosen field of the Conscientious Objector, and his battle is cut out for him precisely there: it is a fight of material ambition and lust of world domination against spiritual forces. The Conscientious Objector asserts his right to use spiritual force. Let him beware how he uses it. Is he willing, in effect, to fight for Germany on the pretext that he objects to fight for his fatherland, or to fight at all?

The Conscientious Objector generally lacks a keen sense of humour, but perhaps this anecdote will appeal to him, for it exhibits the final behaviour of many of his ilk. A Quaker was on board an English vessel which was attacked by the enemy. At first he would take no part in the action. But when the foe got close and boarders leapt onto the deck, he had to do something, and decided instantly. He seized the leader and threw him into the sea, saying, "Friend, thee has no business here".

But the trouble, religiously as well as politically, is that among the Conscientious Objectors are many "wolves in sheep's clothing", "deceitful workers, transforming themselves into Apostles of Christ; and no marvel, for even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light". Many persons pretend that

they are wanting Liberty of Conscience, when what they really want is Unlimited Desire. Therefore from the religious standpoint our best treatment of such, is to leave them to the selective draft of God. In this respect the Society of Friends has set a good example, showing how profoundly they feel the danger of self-deception in religion and the opportunity for spurious claims to rights of conscience. This year, since the United States joined the war, there were more than the usual number of applicants for membership; but the New York Society of Friends voted not to receive eligibles into the fellowship until the war is over.

When Edith Cavell was standing ready for martyrdom, she said, "There is something higher than patriotism", and in her that something higher was itself an act of patriotism. That way lies our hope for the sincere Conscientious Objector: that his very conscientiousness will ultimately compel him to true patriotism when he has been so treated at the very front, through other opportunities of service than with guns—such as the Red Cross affords —that he can see what there actually is in his country's call to fight. At any rate he must not be allowed to kick against the pricks, and must endure the consequences of an honest conscience.

In this connection Mrs. Spencer Trask's published letter to her friends and employees at Saratoga is so pertinent that it may be quoted here; for before the war Katrina Trask was a pronounced Pacifist:

"Since the day that war was declared * * * I
"have constantly refused to take part in any pacifist
"demonstration or to sign any peace petition. On
"the contrary, I have entered in every way into the
"active preparation of the country for war, and I
"have given a glowing sympathy and pride to my
"dear young men who have enlisted. * * * This
"country is a republic—the majority rules, and the
"majority of the United States has chosen the way
"of war. Congress has declared war; our President,
"in words that thrill the soul, has proclaimed war.
"* * * This is not a time to speak of differences,
"of individual creeds, or of personal principles.
"We all wish to work for the same things—liberty,
"democracy, humanity, fraternity. * * * If you
"go to fight this heroic hour, may God's blessing go
"with you. If your conscience forbids your going,
"be brave enough to say so. But you must be very
"sure that it is your conscience which makes objec-
"tion to your going, and not your objection to going
"which makes your conscience. There is the same
"difference between the man who has an honest
"conscientious objection to war and the man who,
"being afraid to go, makes his conscience his ex-
"cuse, that there is between an honest coin and
"counterfeit coin".

O little self, within whose smallness lies
All that man was, and is, and will become * * *
O with what darkness do we cloak thy light,
What dusty folly gather thee for food!
O living Self, O God, O Morning Star,
Give us Thy light, forgive us what we are!

(2) Likewise from the political standpoint our question has become a matter, not for much argument, but for action. *Solvitur ambulando.* At such a crisis, for nations as for individuals, "who hesitates is lost". When the framers of our Constitution guaranteed to our citizens liberty and the pursuit of happiness, recognizing the considerable body of Quakers in the United States they inserted the clause which on its face assured to the Conscientious Objector exemption from military service; but the Society of Friends, in the spirit of the true gentleman, have been as sensitive to honor as to patriotism, and "Slacker" has been no name for them. Though possessed by the idea that in American law it is fundamental that the sovereign responsibility for duty rests upon the conscience of the individual citizen, they recognized also that in the relations of the citizen to the State it belongs to the State to discriminate between certain facts of the general civic situation in regard to other States; and that this discrimination cannot be deputed to any voluntary organization within or without the State. As for voluntary organizations, some that were indisposed to fight have finally done so at a civic crisis from sheer loyalty, which is the sense of civic duty and of gratitude for benefits received. But, unlike the Friends, our so-called "People's Council" of today claims that our conscription law, e.g., is unconstitutional, and proposes to appeal in that sense to the United States Supreme Court, under the guise of Conscientious Objection.

Well, now we are getting down to the realm of action. They, the "People's Council", have appealed to Caesar: to Caesar shall they go. But while their case is pending let them ponder our national Constitution, taken as a whole. The Constitution goes flat against the establishment of any religious organization, as such, within our borders; and exemption from military service in time of the State's need would be in effect to establish a certain form of religion. It would be to grant special privileges to a voluntary organization on the ground of religion. No matter how subtle may be the forms that they assume, ecclesiastical matters, and voluntary organizations based on private religious tenets, are hereby debarred. As Mrs. Trask declares, it is now a dilemma of the individual conscience over against the National Government, and for this "the powers that be are ordained of God". Once the State has decided, the single soul's only alternative to submission is to foreswear the fatherland and take the consequences. Thus the Conscientious Objector must be ready for martyrdom; since the State must be, if anarchy shall not be.

In our democracy the State's decision is determined by majority vote; and when the time for debate is passed, in the crisis of action the objector must choose between submission and revolution, unless he will foreswear his country altogether. And if the Conscientious Objector chooses revolution, he finds himself, logically, in this absurd posi-

tion: that he is a fighter because he does not believe in fighting. Thus the claim for unlimited freedom of action is self-destructive. As even a man's freedom of thought is limited by the conditions of his being, so his claim to unlimited freedom of action is self-destructive. For this is a social world.

This comes out clearly in the New Testament. Even under pagan Rome it was the Christian Apostle Paul who declared that "the powers that be are ordained of God"; and doubtless for this reason, among others, he had words of good counsel for Christian soldiers without repudiating their business as men of war. Hereby St. Paul was following closely the example of Christ's forerunner, John Baptist, who, when soldiers asked him, "What shall we do?" not only did not tell them to cease soldiering, but held up for special commendation a particular Centurion, without even hinting that, while praising the man, he disapproved of the man's military occupation. As a matter of fact, it was the strong hand of the Roman soldiers throughout Palestine that for a spell kept down the rebellious Jews and enabled Jesus to live His life and preach His Gospel, until the Roman lifted his hand and allowed Jesus to be crucified "in His hour". "Order is Heaven's first law", and at the mysterious moment when God elected to send His Son into the world, there was order in Palestine for a little while. No wonder that, looking back on that short, impressive span of thirty years which covered his Lord's earthly life—no

wonder that Paul the Apostle saw it so; and that he could say even of pagan Rome, "The powers that be are ordained of God".

Hence I think that, from the political point of view, our proper treatment of the Conscientious Objector is to leave it to our Government to handle him. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's". The League to Enforce Peace, under Ex-President Taft's guidance, has publicly called attention to England's experience in this matter, and has recommended to our Government the following procedure with drafted men who object to war-service at our Country's call:

First: That the trial or courtmartial take place immediately after the refusal of a board to exempt a drafted man.

Second: That arrangements be made to place such a man either in a detention camp or prison under civil, not military authority; and

Third: That the penalties for men who refuse any service under compulsion or agreement be standardized.

These suggestions of The League to Enforce Peace are based on the solution finally accepted in England after one and a half years' experience, and they represent the best judgment of those who have studied the problem. But for weal or woe the decision in this matter rests, as I have said, on our National Government. For our nation the die is cast, and in spite of our faults we are too far on the road of Christian civilization to court by

divided counsels the disaster of Russia at this awful time. "To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven." For the United States of America now is the time of action, of concentration on the chosen end. As Dr. Edward J. Wheeler said to the "People's Council", to substitute unlimited debate for decisive action now "may sound exalted and noble to the ears of Berlin and Heidelberg, but it sounds ominously like treason here". The fact is, that the Conscientious Objector is not merely registering a protest: he is encouraging the Germans in their war for the religious, moral, social and political standards of the Hun. President Wilson has declared that the practical question before us is, How shall those that love righteousness apply force to overthrow brutal force? But in effect the Conscientious Objector is so applying what he believes to be his spiritual force as to assist brutal force to have its way; and thereby he is disloyal to our nation's expressed will. Let no one deny that Conscience is a force: it is one of the most tremendous forces in this world; but, like the lightning, conscience when misguided or misused is terrible. Therefore, while God is dealing with the Conscientious Objector on the religious ground, let the nation deal with him on the political ground.

And while the Government is dealing with him, let the Conscientious Objector read and ponder Edward Everett Hale's story, "The Man Without a Country", which was a parable for the Copper-

heads in our Civil War. And when he has pondered this, let the Conscientious Objector go and see one of those terrible film pictures that are now exhibited everywhere. Let him see with his soul, as well as with his eyes, what is meant by "No Man's Land".

Like many a noble physician and surgeon, Dr. R. C. Cabot has had his eyes opened to the profound spiritual issues that are inwrought with the ghastly details of bodily harm. During one of his vigils in his laboratory while he was using his microscope he heard a cry in the adjoining hospital. "But", he relates, "like Uncle Sam, I had "often heard such disturbances around me, and "knew that the proper authorities would probably "attend to them. It was not my business. A mo-"ment later a nurse rushed in, and, following her "pointing hand, I saw two men wrestling at the end "of the ward. They looked much alike, as any con-"testants superficially seen are apt to. One might "have regarded it merely as a disgusting row, dis-"creditable to both parties, as so many Pacifists now "regard the war in Europe. Both were panting, "scowling, struggling. No reasonable persuasion "was going on. Mutual hate it seemed. But the "nearer, truer view (which the Pacifist refuses) "showed me that a hospital orderly was fighting for "his life with a lunatic patient in delirium. The "madman had already injured one patient before the "orderly saw him. It was a fight between law and "lawlessness, between right and wrong. I don't

"need to say how eagerly I got into the fight. But
"perhaps I do need to show that the same motive
"which hitherto had kept me in paths of peace drove
"me now to war. The same desire to save life, to
"foster strength, to preserve order, was my motive
"in both activities. Peace and War are not always
"opposites. They may be branches from the same
"root—desire for service, now by one means, now
"by the other.

"The orderly is the Entente. The delirious
"patient is Germany. The helpless patients around
"them are the European nations. The doctor is the
"United States, first looking on, now ready to take
"his part. He does not fight merely for his own
"interests, or for anyone else's interests, for it is the
"cause that calls him, the cause that ennobles one
"of the fighters and degrades the other. That hos-
"pital orderly, like the Entente, is no habitual
"fighter. He might have been in the wrong, and I
"might have interfered to stop his abusing a patient.
"But just now, like the Entente, he is ennobled by
"his cause. Hence it was not pugnacity that drew
"me into that fight. It was the defense of the right
"against lawlessness. So it should be with our
"country now."

Like Dr. Cabot at the beginning of his experience, aloof in his laboratory of abstractions the sincere Conscientious Objector is not yet aware of the grim realities and the high spiritual significance of the actual crisis. So, as a preliminary of our treatment of him, I think he should be drafted to the

front as part of our Red Cross contingent. And, to test his genuineness and hold him up unmistakably to all concerned, as he stands between the living and the dead in hamlets where the Hun has been indulging himself in rape and rapine, the Conscientious Objector should be obliged to wear conspicuously on his breast a button with the letters C. O.* If his conscience is not seared with a hot iron, I think that then and there his objections to military service against Germany will melt away. He will seize a sword, and as he fights with brain and brawn against the wickedness of men that would be mere brutes if they were not spirits possessed of evil, I am sure that the Objector will see that Jesus Christ is blessing him for his change of mind. He will recognize that there is a great gulf between a campaign for Liberty of Conscience and a campaign of Unlimited Desire. He will have *exercised* his conscience to be void of offence toward God and toward men.

* This suggestion of the button I owe to my friend and colleague in Union Theological Seminary, Professor C. F. Fagnani, in his letter published in the *New York Times;* and I ask his leave to repeat it here.

J. C. & W. E POWERS PRINT, NEW YORK